

Ethnic cleansing in the Caucasus

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On the evening of May 21, Georgians gathered around their televisions to glean information about the day's parliamentary elections or to watch the Chelsea-Manchester United football match. Meanwhile, Nana Kardava lay in hospital, wounded when forces of the Russian-backed separatist regime that controls the Georgian territory of Abkhazia opened fire on a bus that was set to take her and fellow citizens to vote. Unfortunately, Kardava is just the latest victim of a petty autocracy built upon ethnic cleansing.

Kardava is the school principal in Nabakevi, a village in the Gali region of Abkhazia inhabited by ethnic Georgians but controlled by the separatist regime. She wanted to vote, but the de facto authorities nixed Georgian polling stations on territory they control and blocked the bridge to the neighboring Georgian-controlled region of Mingrelia. Consequently, Georgian authorities offered citizens like Kardava the next best solution: If they could reach the Georgian-administered village of Khurcha on foot, buses would transport them to a special polling station established in Zugdidi, the main town of Mingrelia.

Abkhaz militia at work:

As the schoolteacher and her companions prepared to board, Abkhaz militia destroyed the buses with machine gun rounds and rocket-propelled grenades fired from their checkpoint just before Khurcha. Georgian police returned fire to evacuate the would-be voters, among whom were seven wounded.

This tale is part of the unsurprising aftermath of the ethnic cleansing that sprang from the final throes of the Soviet Union. Even as the Soviet Union disintegrated, Moscow exploited ethnic tensions in the South Caucasus in an attempt to thwart Georgian independence and, failing that, to hobble Georgia's restored statehood. Backed by a popular vote, Georgia declared independence in April 1991. Backed by Moscow, Abkhaz separatists declared independence three months later. Civil war broke out in the summer of 1992 and, after brutal fighting punctuated by violated ceasefires, the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi fell in September 1993.

The Abkhaz separatists and their Russian sponsors destroyed a thriving multi-ethnic society of 550,000, among whom 18 percent were ethnic Abkhaz. Eighty-percent — Georgians, Greeks, Estonians, Jews and more— were either killed or terrorized into flight by systematic murder, rape, beating and plunder.

Three times the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) labeled it ethnic cleansing and, two weeks ago, the United Nations General Assembly recognized it as such.

Today, hundreds of thousands live as internally displaced people in the rest of Georgia or as refugees in other lands. A few have returned to the Gali region. Many of them have left again. Those who stay cling to their homes and their way of life, strangers in their own land, harassed at every turn.

Even the Georgian Orthodox Church is harassed. For example, in early April, a gang of thugs — apparently led by security officials of the de facto authorities — abducted Father Pimen from the Saint George Church in Ilori and hauled him to Sukhumi where he was beaten and expelled from Abkhazia. Apsnipress, the Abkhaz news service, reported that the priest had been “preaching nationalistic ideas.” In reality, he had been conducting the Divine Liturgy and distributing Psalms in the Georgian language. His most radical act was to promote the building of a new Georgian church in the region.

One problem with ethnic cleansing is that what is cleansed must be kept clean, so terror is perpetual. If Father Pimen were to succeed in building a new church, it could become a smudge on ethnically cleansed Abkhazia. It might attract more Georgians back to the region. It might open a cultural center. It might spawn the idea of yet another Georgian church. And, if Kardava were free to vote in Mingrelia, others might get the idea of spanning the unnatural line that divides two Georgian territories with commerce, education, family and worship of God.

Moreover, the danger is not limited to ethnic Georgians. Sooner rather than later, an ethnic Abkhaz might think that he really does not hate Georgians. Maybe he could sell some produce in Mingrelia. Maybe there he could buy a needed part for a moribund tractor. Maybe he could start a business.

A regime on ethnic cleansing:

People might start living their lives without regard to the petty ethnic hatreds that underpin the Sukhumi regime. Consequently, a regime founded upon ethnic cleansing must be a prison not only for the few remaining people of the nationality that it chased away, but also for the titular dominant ethnic group.

How vocally can any Abkhaz person express sympathy for the Georgian priest? Remorse over what befell the Georgian teacher? In such a regime, everyone must choose words, friends, business associates and spouse very carefully. Everyone must hew to the humor of the mob; everyone must fear secret police, informants and thugs. Human decency is choked but never killed.

There is no decent future for the separatist regime in Abkhazia. Resolving the conflict is not a matter of winning or losing to Georgia. It is a matter of reclaiming a future of human decency, which can only be achieved through negotiation, democracy and respect for every person.

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